

shore towards the cay and see fish like juvenile barracudas on the way. There is also an unofficial trail that hugs the rocky shore bringing you closer to the cay. Be careful not to damage coral or other marine life when entering from the rocks. The island itself is ringed with a variety of corals and fish in the water and birds perched on its shore. Although a strong current often runs on the Tortola side of the cay, you should be OK if you go with it and not against it. Waterlemon is one of the only places on St. John that is home to the large orangish cushion sea stars. For most people the quality of the resources and the remote beauty of the bays are worth the walk.

**10. Brown Bay.** Accessible only by boat or trail, Brown Bay has both coral and seagrass habitats to explore. Turtles, juvenile fish, conch and other invertebrates may be seen in the grass bed, off the rocky shore in waters less than 10 feet. Towards the left (facing the water), out near the first point of the bay is a thick fringing reef composed of many different types of coral that continues on to Waterlemon Bay. Towards the right, a reef with a greater concentration of gorgonians appears after a short swim.

**11. Haulover Bays** are reached by a drive through the roller coaster hills of the East End. The Coral Bay side of the narrow isthmus has calm waters beyond a rock and sand beach. Despite an abundance of sea urchins and the generally rocky bottom, there are fish and scattered corals in the shallows and a little more abundance further out past the edges of the beach. This bay was featured in the movie, “The Big Blue.”

An informal trail leads from the opposite side of the road to the rocky windswept shore facing Tortola. In 20 to 30 feet of water are star corals boulders and a fair amount and assortment of fish. Can be a rewarding experience for strong swimmers.

**SOUTH SHORE:**

**12. Salt Pond Bay,** on the southeast corner of the island, is a 7-minute walk from the parking lot off Route 107. While not as sandy or shady as most North Shore beaches, the water is protected and usually clear. A longish swim to the middle of the bay out beyond the boat moorings brings you to two sets of jagged rocks that break the surface, the first being more comprehensive. A large assortment of

fish and corals cover the rocks to their bases in about 15 feet of water. A 10-foot pillar coral lies toppled but still alive there. On the sides of the bay are more fish and coral getting better the further out from the beach you go, especially on the east, or left side, (facing the water) all the way around to the cobblestone beach on the way to Ram’s Head. Squid and turtles are commonly seen in Salt Pond Bay as well.


**13. Little Lameshur Bay.** At the end of the road on the south shore is a protected sand and rubble beach separated from a larger rocky beach (Great Lameshur Bay) by Yawzi Point. A small cluster of rock and coral just off the beach to the west is a good beginner’s spot. Otherwise, on rare calm days, the western shoreline all the way to Europa Bay is a visual delight of deep cliff clefts and canyons with schools of fish in the deep water beneath you. A striking reef, somewhat damaged by recent hurricanes is a far swim out, at the tip of Yawzi Point. A rocky beach on the left of Yawzi Pt., about ¾ of the way out on Yawzi Pt. Trail affords a closer egress to the tip.

**14. Great Lameshur Bay** is rocky and the snorkeling way out on the eastern side. Around the point, large boulders form sea caves that are often abundant with snappers and other fish. Nearby, among the star corals in 50 feet of water lie the foundation remains of Tektite, an underwater living habitat for aquanauts in 1969-70. This is one of the most scenic shorelines and remote snorkeling spots on St. John.

**15. Chocolate Hole,** about 2 miles south from Cruz Bay on route 104, is in a residential neighborhood outside of the Park. Turn off Chocolate Hole East Road and find the right had turn down to the rock and sand beach. A thick seagrass bed just offshore offers a close look at juvenile fish, occasional rays, conchs and other sealife specific to this habitat. A mostly dead reef with surprising amounts of fish lies fairly far out to the left of the beach. This beach, like the other South Shore areas described above, are usually calm when the north shore beaches are stormy.

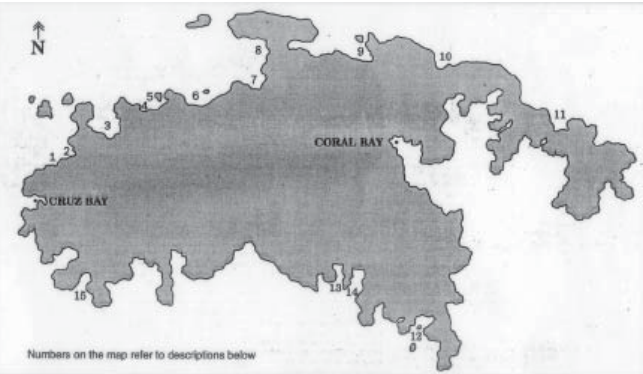
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Virgin Islands National Park

## Where’s the Best Snorkeling?



Nearly 1/2 of Virgin Islands National Park is under water. Mangrove shorelines, seagrass beds, fringing and patch coral reefs offer a diverse and ample array of snorkeling opportunities. However, identifying the “best” snorkeling on St. John is highly subjective, based on factors such as individual snorkeling/swimming abilities, water and wind conditions and the marine life particular to a given site. This guide describes a variety of potential snorkeling areas so that you can choose what’s best for your own interests and needs.

**North Shore:**

**1. Salomon/Honeymoon Bay.** Between the bays’ beautiful sandy beaches is a rocky headland that extends into the water. Basketball-sized brain corals, lettuce leaf, elkhorn, knobby mustard hill and even some pillar corals are found in the western side of Honeymoon Bay atop an older reef platform. Fish populations are abundant and comprehensive. Look closely to observe the locally rare black and white geometric encrusting tunicates. The water is clear and 10 feet or less in depth. Further seaward in deeper water are scattered star corals and rubble that offer protection for fish. Coral heads fringe the shoreline from Salomon westward toward Cruz Bay and eastward from Honeymoon to Caneel Bay. Note: There is no boat exclusion zone at Honeymoon. Be cautious of boats and

dinghies. This beach is a popular destination for hiking tours and charter boats from mid-morning to mid-afternoon.

**2. Caneel Bay.** A fringing reef in about 10 feet of water hugs the shore east of the resort’s main beach (to the right of the pier.) It is generally protected from wind and waves. While not particularly dense, the reef supports a mixture of seafans and other gorgonians as well as hard corals such as brain, mustard hill and the relatively rarer finger corals. It is a good beginner’s site if the numerous sea urchins are avoided. Continuing east beyond the point to Scott’s Beach, the reef peters out. Only the main beach is open from the land. All others at Caneel are accessible to non-guests by water only.

**3. Hawksnest Bay** has a couple of shallow reefs that extend perpendicularly from the sandy beach. Some of this area is too shallow to safely snorkel above it and must be viewed from the sides. Since the 1980’s various storms and land development pressures have destroyed or smothered much of this reef but it has begun to recover nicely in the past few years. Fast growing elkhorn coral, hit hard by disease in the past three decades, seems to be making a comeback. Scattered corals are found in waters up to 20 feet off the eastern end of the beach. The rocky headland separating Hawksnest from Gibney’s Beach to the east is mostly devoid of fish or coral. From the dead reef in front of the yellow Oppenheimer’s house, a few coral heads follow the shoreline below Easter Rock.

**4. Jumbie Bay** is accessed from Northshore Road by a wooden stairway some 200 feet east of a parking area on the other side of the road. Beware of traffic. From the right side of the beach begins a shallow reef that extends, maze-like at first, all the way along the cliffs to Trunk Bay. The sandy bottom is eventually about 10 feet beneath you as you follow the reef. Seaward, the water becomes deeper with very large brain and star corals. Look for hidden lobsters or perhaps a nurse shark.

Going to the left from Jumbie, a little coral grows (including new elkhorns) before a 5 to 10 minute swim brings one to 15 – 30 feet of water where abundant marine life covers the underwater slopes of the island and offshore boulders. From here you can see around the bend to **Denis Bay** and **Perkins Cay**. Both have some of the nicest reefs around but are a long distance from Jumbie. Denis Beach has “beware of dogs” and “keep off” signs, but by law one can go up on the beach as long as one doesn’t go beyond the tree line

onto private property. Wind chop can be a factor in the Jumbie/Denis area.

**5. Trunk Bay’s** Underwater Trail may seem somewhat overrated, despite its fame, but is good for beginners, children or anybody that wants to learn about marine life by reading the plaques located about 5 to 15 feet beneath you. The coral is in surprisingly good shape despite abuse from winter storms and thousands of visitors yearly at this most crowded (but beautiful) St. John beach. Fish populations are abundant, perhaps enhanced by illegal feeding activities. The island’s biggest population of puddingwife fish seems to inhabit this bay, which along with Jumbie is a no-take marine reserve. Beyond the official confines of the trail the reef continues, fringing the western shore of the Cay. There’s not much to see on the Cay’s tip or eastern side. When winter swells are not rolling in, Trunk Bay is usually calm and clear. The underwater trail is apt to be very busy from 10 a.m. to about 3:30 p.m.

Down at the left (west) end of the beach begins a fringing reef (see Jumbie Bay). This diverse reef is a good place to see tunicates, also known as sea squirts. This area is popular with tour boat snorkelers.

At the right (east) end of Trunk Bay beach begins a very shallow reef that hugs the shore to Windswept, another “private” beach. The wind further out and the relative beat up look of the coral here may dissuade you from going any further. Trunk Bay has the added attraction of lifeguards, flush toilets, showers (8 – 4 daily) lockers, a gift shop and snack bar.

**6. Cinnamon Bay** tends to be one of the windiest locations on the North Shore, making snorkeling slow going. Visibility isn’t usually affected, however. From the beach out to Cinnamon Bay Cay are patches of reefs that include a small but interesting ledge where close inspection may reveal a variety of invertebrates and juvenile fish. Shallow areas of sand can be used for resting before snorkeling around either side of the cay (larger corals) or to the 20-foot backside where a greater concentration of gorgonians (“soft corals”) can be found. Off the west end of the beach towards Little Cinnamon Bay is a section of reef in shallow water that is largely silted over. A few fish can be seen as well as part of a propeller of a small airplane that crashed there long ago.

In the canyons of the mostly dead reef at the opposite (east) end of the beach are often plenty of fish. The

huge Jewfish have been seen here in years past. Along the rest of the beach are scattered coral heads providing shelter for some fish.

**7. Maho Bay.** The seagrass beds of this shallow bay provide food for green sea turtles, which are seen more frequently in the early morning or late afternoon. Limited coral and fish can be seen at the rocky tips of the bay away from the beach. As with Francis Bay to the east, Maho is usually calm with minimal wind chop, and is much less affected by winter swells than elsewhere on the North shore.

**8. Francis Bay.** For beginners, a very small area of coral and sponges shelters a good number of mostly juvenile fish at the western end of the beach towards Maho. Water depth is about 8 feet. A few juvenile fish can also be seen just off the sandy shoreline near the parking lot. For endurance swimmers, enter the water from the rocky section of the other end of the beach. Halfway out to the bay’s point begins a varied, narrow reef situated in a sandy bottom in 10 feet or less water. Over the years this has been a good place to spot an octopus or sea cucumber. For an even longer swim, round the bend toward the tip of Mary’s Point where the reef becomes deeper and denser. Use of a boat or kayak for the longer distances, including the adjacent (and excellent) Whistling Cay, is a good option. Remember that all rowed, paddled or motored vessels must enter/exit Francis Bay in the marked dinghy channel at the western end of the beach. Francis Bay is often a good place to view sea turtles and predator fish like jacks and tarpon (and also pelicans) pursue clouds of tiny “fry” fish.

**9. Leinster/Waterlemon Bay** is bordered by the Leinster Bay trail, which can be driven with a 4-wheel drive vehicle for about .30 miles (use extreme caution leaving the pavement). A 10-minute walk brings you to a narrow stretch of sand where entry is gained to a shallow reef dominated by large star coral boulders. Some of these coral heads were overturned in Hurricane Bertha (July 1996) but are still living and providing a habitat for parrotfish, tangs and juvenile grunts. Not far to seaward the bay bottom drops off steeply. Here are blue chromis, an occasional turtle, and gorgonians.

10 minutes further down the trail at Waterlemon Bay, one can take a long swim out from the hard packed sand beach to Waterlemon Cay or swim along the eastern